

Focus shifts to finding compromise on SCHIP

By NOELLE STRAUB – (Billings) Gazette Washington Bureau – October 19, 2007

WASHINGTON - Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, D-Mont., joined congressional leaders to negotiate a new compromise Thursday immediately after the House failed to override President Bush's veto of a State Children's Health Insurance Program extension.

Baucus, the main author of the Senate's bill, said shortly after the vote that he was heading into a meeting with a half-dozen members of Congress, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev.

"We're going to determine what's next," Baucus said in a brief interview. "But the main thing is to keep our eye on the ball here, and for me it's working with members of Congress and the White House to be sure there's no reduction in the number of Montana children who would otherwise be covered under the bill."

Baucus said that under the vetoed bill about 12,000 more Montana children would be covered in addition to the 14,000 already in the program.

A compromise would involve relatively minor changes to the vetoed bill, Baucus said.

"We'll work out a couple adjustments but by and large keep the main part for us, the gist of the program," he said. "There might be some adjustments about the edges, but it's basically to get the job done and help kids."

He said he wouldn't compromise on the number of kids covered in Montana, and "by extension" the number of kids nationwide. Lawmakers said the Senate bill would add 3.3 million children to the program, bringing the total covered to 9.9 million.

The vetoed measure would have raised SCHIP funding by \$35 billion over five years, paid for largely by a 61-cents-per-pack tax increase on cigarettes. Bush wanted a \$5 billion increase and opposed the cigarette tax boost.

Baucus said he does not think there will be an "appreciable" or "significant" reduction in the \$35 billion figure.

But he said there might be additional cutbacks in the childless adults covered under the program. The vetoed bill would have phased out over several years childless adults in the program.

The administration also wants to limit coverage to households under 200 percent of the poverty line, an annual income of about \$34,000 for a family of three. Opponents of the measure say it would cover too many higher-income children.

Baucus said the measure Congress passed would simply extend current law, which limits coverage to 200 percent of the poverty line; states that want to cover up to 300 percent must apply for and be granted a waiver by the administration.

"The bill that was vetoed does not change one iota income eligibility limits," Baucus said. "We'll take a look at the perception that current law is changed. It's not reality, it's not the fact, (but) we'll probably look at the perception to fairly and appropriately deal with them."

Baucus said Bush thus far has refused to meet personally with lawmakers about SCHIP. Pelosi asked for a meeting, he said, but Bush offered only a meeting with his staff. Baucus said he hopes that changes.

"The goal here is not confrontation, it's to get to together and resolve this," Baucus said.

Rep. Denny Rehberg, R-Mont., voted to override the president's veto. He called the House results disappointing and said it's "absolutely critical" to provide this health insurance for Montana's children.

"Now more than ever it's essential that we bring together Republicans and Democrats, from both the House and Senate, and sit down with the president and try to reach consensus on a new bill," Rehberg said in a prepared statement. "We're all going to have to give and take a bit more to get this thing done but it's what we've got to do."

SCHIP is a decade-old, federal-state program to help children whose families don't qualify for Medicaid but cannot afford private health insurance. Any SCHIP funding increase would be on top of the \$25 billion now available over five years.